

COMMUNICATION AND REFLECTION IN TRAINING MASTER STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that communicative competence and reflective skills are necessary attributes of future managers and expected learning outcomes of university graduates with Master degrees. Though believed seemingly opposite, these core competences can complement each other being developed concurrently and ultimately benefit students professional competence.

The methodology used as the base for elective course design is the theory of step-by-step development of mental actions, the Multiple Intelligence Theory, learning-oriented approach, cooperative learning.

Communication is considered the bases for the relations of all participants in the educational process and a fundamental ability to take necessary knowledge and skills from all resources available.

Reflection plays the role of means (reflective models, reflective techniques), aim of teaching and learning (developed reflective competence).

The authors substantiate the need to arrange a psychologically favorable learning environment. The framework for concurrent development of reflective and communication skills of master students is presented.

The research findings provide evidence for positive interdependence of communication and reflection level development. Moreover, delivering the course in the English language has increased its impact on Russian speaking Master students' professional and cross-cultural knowledge, as students are exposed to examples from business practices in Russia and abroad thus providing the opportunities for comparison and evaluation.

Key words: Masters in Management, communication skills, reflective competence, learner autonomy, expected learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Both international educational standards like *The framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* [1] and draft Russian standards for professional higher education include well developed communication and reflective skills as desired graduate attributes.

The Russian educational standards for master students in Management of 2013 state critical thinking (reflective) skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation and readiness to adequate behavior in non-standard situation alongside with the skills of oral and written

communication in everyday situations and professional contexts as general competences and expected learning outcomes.

How can these seemingly opposite attributes – being reflective and communicative be developed within the framework of the master course in Management?

The purpose of the article is to prove that communication and reflective skills as necessary attributes for graduates from master course in Management, though believed very different, can complement each other being developed concurrently.

The authors present an elective course providing conditions for specially organized activities aimed at communication and reflective competences development and argue that it benefits for developing a professional competence of a master graduate with a degree in Management.

Both communication and reflection have a long history of research by experts in psychology, sociology. In our paper, we focus on the perspective of educational science.

Reflection in education

The traditional understanding of *reflection* is as “a form of mental processing ...that we use to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome.” (Moon, 1999).

In this article under *reflection* in education we mean three interrelated concepts: reflective knowledge, reflective skills or abilities and reflective techniques or technologies.

Michael Wallas considers reflection being ‘deep processing’ of new knowledge in which the learner develops understanding of the essential underlying meaning of it.’

According to John Dewey [6], *reflection* is not only thinking, but knowledge and attitude to what we are doing in learning, making specific realization in action. But, as defined by Schön [11], the concept of reflection also includes *activity* as a stimulus and result of reflection. In our context, it is learning and subsequent professional activity.

Also, reflection in education can be defined in terms of a student’s capacity to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, to learn from constructive criticism and to practice critical reflection by monitoring their own work performance and interpersonal interactions.

In this paper we consider *reflective competence* as an ability and wholesome attribute of teachers and learners to realize their reflective skills, attitude to getting knowledge and components of learning through their activity in educational process which can lead to the successful result.

In the ECBE level descriptors the following reflective skills are stated as attributes of Master students:

- ability to *self evaluation* is presented as being reflective on own and others’ functioning in order to improve practice; critical thinking skills;
- *autonomy* as an independent and self critical learner, guiding the learning of others and managing own requirements for continuing professional development.

Critical thinking skills are presented as:

- Analysis: with critical awareness can undertake analysis of complex, incomplete or contradictory areas of knowledge communicating the outcome effectively
- Synthesis: with critical awareness, can synthesise information in a manner that may be innovative, utilising knowledge or processes from the forefront of the discipline / practice

- Evaluation: has a level of conceptual understanding that will allow her/him critically to evaluate research, advanced scholarship and methodologies and argue alternative approaches

- Application: can demonstrate initiative and originality in problem solving. Can act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level, making decisions in complex and unpredictable situations.

Analyses of Russian sources on reflection in education and our own research allowed us identifying three types of reflective skills to be developed in the course for master students in Management[2].

1 Reflective skills presenting master student's ability of self-management in education, including life-long learning (LLL) comprise goal-setting, planning, self-control and self-correction in learning. In order to make a learner being able to treat teacher's goals as their own, a teacher should provide a life or professional context in the beginning. It can make good conditions for internal motivation. And gradually students learn to become more autonomous to set goals themselves. Final reflection at the end of the lesson helps to evaluate if the set goals are achieved.

Planning as a skill can be developed as strategic planning of building a career or short-term (for doing a task). The focus is on making a student aware of the right choice of the steps of the task fulfillment and student ability to explain his choice to the teacher or to a peer student.

Another helpful reflective ability is being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses. It makes learning more efficient in terms of time and results.

2 Reflection as a means of knowledge construction is based on step-by-step development of critical thinking. A student gradually rises his conceptual skills from the awareness of a certain issue in management theory to the ability to transform information into a different form or evaluation of a certain problem's solution presented by the author and creative transferring of the idea to another context.

3 Reflection is usually considered as taking place individually, but it is not quite right. In its communicative function reflection is realized in reflective communicative skills [2].

An ability to play different roles and to look upon the situation (life or professional) through your partner's eyes, find the solution evaluating options together with peers are among them. These skills bridge communication and reflection.

Communication in education

The methodology underlying communication competence development is given in the works of Russian and foreign experts in psychology and sociology: Porygin, Schedrovitsky, Nikiforova, J. Collins, P. Drucker are similar in classifying communication skills into generic and special.

Generic communicative competence comprises a group of communication skills and abilities to communicate in a variety of life contexts. Special communication competence is profession-specific. Thus, a manager should have an ability of set a purpose for a contact, choose an appropriate strategy of communication interaction, ways of the set goal achievement and realizing the result from the contact.

The issue of communication competence development was investigated in the works of J. Frances, M. Woodcock, C. Hollyford, I. Hoffmann, etc. Gosling J., Mintzberg H., [8] in particular, researchers and practitioners in Management focused on development of the leader's potential in communicative process. They consider that efficient

communication model comprises a mechanism of a manager's personal and professional development.

In this paper we follow the definition of Petrovskaya [5], who defined communication competence as a bank of skills for development of efficient communicative action in a certain life or professional context of inter-personal interaction.

Both academics and practitioners agree that communication skills are one of the most important competences managers need to be effective. Managers must possess the ability to get their point across to employees, co-workers and customers. Effective communications ensures that everyone is on the same page and knows what is expected of them.

Among communication skills named in level descriptors for master students by ECBE are the ability to engage confidently in academic and professional communication with others, reporting on action clearly, autonomously and competently and ability to work effectively with a group as leader or member, clarifying tasks and making use of the capacities of group members, negotiate and handle conflict with confidence and , guide the learning of others and managing own requirements for continuing professional development.

Communication inside and outside the classroom (via information technologies, using other people as resources) has become an efficient and effective means of teaching and learning. Students are treated as individuals with their personal life and work experience and have equal rights to speak put their ideas. Thus, the efficiency of communication in teaching and learning depend on successful subject-subject relation between a teacher and students [15].

Communication plus reflection

The methodology grounds for concurrent development of communication and reflection is in the theory of step-by-step development of mental actions by Vygotsky, Galperin and Talyzina.

The main idea behind the hypothesis for the benefit of concurrent development of communication and reflection is the idea of the critical relation between an individual's internal and external human behavior. According to this theory, mental development as well as knowledge and skills' acquisition takes place when being interiorized, that is being gradually transferred from external (material) activity into internal mental perspective.

As a result of this transfer, external actions are transformed into mental, thus being interiorized. During this process they are being processed, verbalized, consolidated, being ready to be transferred to another context. Our addition to this theory is inclusion of the activity stage when students can use the developed skill into another context to their choice.

In accordance with interconnection of reflection and communication, any idea becomes meaningful for a person, if and when it helps to construct new knowledge or to skills, if students can demonstrate their understanding of new information and are able to apply new skills in communication with partners. Thus, communication and reflective competencies are developed in a complex of a master student in management's professional competence.

Concurrent development of communication and reflective skills facilitates developing abilities to look upon partners in communication from their perspective, to treat a problem in another way, find the solution in a reflective dialogue or polylogue.

These skills are helpful in proper building of relations in learning and in future managerial contexts, in professional and cross-cultural communication.

From the point of view of didactics, teacher's role is in gradual transfer of responsibility for a specific reflective or communication skill development, as well as the whole learning process management from oneself to a student. For the teacher this process starts with interpretation of his activity and students' activity with the consequent methodic support. Gradually this support takes a latent form, then a teacher stops it [12]. The teacher's role is that of facilitator, advisor, learning process organizer. At the same time students taking responsibility for their learning become more autonomous and active agents of learning, responsible for its results.

Other methodological concepts underlying concurrent development of communication and reflection is the Multiple Intelligence Theory and learning and learner oriented approaches which promote individualisation in teaching and learning with a variety of task formats.

The teacher considers learner's and own experiences in applying knowledge to practice. By the beginning of the course master students have already got a bank of special knowledge in Business and Management courses delivered at the stage of their baccalaureate training. So, they have a good opportunity to build new knowledge on the available information comparing and evaluating "former" and "new" knowledge, Russian business reality and business environment. Students are not given the right answers but encouraged to express their own opinions based on one's life and work experience and knowledge from related courses. Thus, in the process of learning new knowledge is being constructed alongside with developing critical thinking skills – analysis, synthesis, evaluation, transferring knowledge and skills across disciplines and cultures.

Reflective skills positively influence communication skills development as they provide favorable conditions for sharing ideas and solving problems in interaction, enhance students' responsibility of a group member for the whole group results when performing a task.

A good example of integration of communication and reflective skills is cooperative learning of R. Slavin, R and D. Johnson, E. Polat. They treat cooperation of learners and teachers as equal partners with different roles and one goal to re-discover knowledge, built learning results together. Reaching learning results and new knowledge construction takes place in communication

A teacher as a more experienced partner motivates students to creative process participation in reflective knowledge acquisition and skills development. Playing a role of a learning process manager a teacher provides students with instructions for task performance, helps them to develop criteria of task assessment within a group discussion, and builds a verbal and non-verbal feedback of control and assessment.

Becoming active agents of communication students develop communicative and reflective skills as well as re-discover professional knowledge coming across new information. When formulating new ideas in their own words they process new information, thus integrating new knowledge with already known [15].

Thus, communication facilitates developing critical thinking (reflective) skills of analyses, evaluation, transformation. Teaching and learning practice have shown that it is not only easier and more interesting to study together, but also more productive [10]. Not only academic results achieved are higher, but intellectual development is also more productive.

As the analyses of teaching methods and assessment of their efficiency have shown, the best from technological point of view and most effective for communication and reflection development from the perspective of learner-centered approach have proved to be interactive teaching methods [4].

Active and interactive modes of teaching/learning including seminars in a dialogue regime, psychological workshops, group discussions, business and role games make favourable environment for involving a future manager into communication in classes.

Interactive technologies are mostly aimed at building a wider environment of students' interrelation not only with a teacher but, with each other and on a leading role of students' activity in training, thus developing their communication skills.

Interactive technologies address a background subjective experience of a learner and help them to acquire their own ways of discovering their social experience. L.N. Kulikova [9] notes the following positive aspects of interactive technologies: the subjects of the educational process acting in the same content environment; joint plunging into the problem field of the task under solution, i.e. inclusion into integral creative environment; concordance in choice of means and techniques of the task solution; joint coming into close emotional state.

The problem with teaching materials' development and employment for the purpose of creative productive environment for communication and reflective skills development is in the choice of a good balance of tasks aimed at reflection and communication development.

In our opinion, there are two ways of developing master students' reflective competence concurrently with communication skills: by integrating a reflective component into interactive tasks and step-by-step developing students' reflective skills in communication.

Unfortunately, there are not so many courses in the curriculum of Master students in Management in Siberian Federal University, providing conditions for interactive methods employment. Concurrent development of reflection and communication competences demands specially organized learning environment [2].

Such an environment was organized within the framework of an elective course *Business across cultures*. The course was considered useful as it provides master students in Management not only with conditions of reflective and communication development but with additional knowledge in cultural awareness necessary for managers in globalization age [3].

Materials

The idea to develop an interdisciplinary course *Business across Cultures* was inspired with the book written by Laura M. English and Sarah Lynn [7] and supported by the Institute authorities as it was believed that the course could be of multiple benefits for master students. First, it addresses the issues of ethics and corporate culture in global business environment, and creates a supportive environment where students communicate on business issues at the same time developing and practicing their reflective skills of critical thinking and self-management in simulated real-life contexts.

The choice of themes for the course aim to meet the needs of masters in Management in the era of global economy.

The course outline is the following:

- First contacts across cultures.
- Cultural stereotypes and business.

- Management across cultures.
- Marketing across cultures.
- Negotiation styles across cultures.
- Working internationally.
- Globalization: impact on business.

Business across Cultures is delivered in a series of interactive lectures and seminars; modes of interaction including individual, pair and group work, discussions.

The framework involves four steps: firstly, providing students with a clear instruction for the activity; secondly, facilitating students' reflective practice by including problem tasks, thirdly, organizing communication to practice group communication on professional issues addressed in the course, and creating structures and algorithms to help students to think and do tasks individually; and fourthly, using criterion referenced assessment to encourage student feedback and reflective peer assessment, by providing students with favorable environment and time for their reflection.

The roles of a teacher and learners are those of partners working on the students' progress in the field. Teacher is a facilitator helping students in constructing new knowledge smoothly as they can first be guided by a teacher scaffolding frameworks. The choice of tasks and activities are based on the above considered methodology. Problem-solving tasks, individual and group reflection, active learning and interactive tasks are in the tool of kits of a teacher conducting classes.

Gradually, students learn not only work on the course individually and in group but also how to assess their own and the groupmate's performance.

Moreover, tasks are written with the aim to help students in developing their self-management techniques. For example, by expressing their view on the lesson's objective or planning a home task step-by-step or participating in a project work students are encouraged to develop their organisational and planning skills.

Thus, professional management skills are developed concurrently with communicative skills and reflection.

Cross-cultural differences are in the focus at all stages of the course. And provides a food for comparison and analysis both in business and outside business contexts. Special focus is on reflection and discussion of real-life situations from everyday life and business where cross cultural differences and misunderstandings can make barriers to productive communication. A list of recommended texts for independent reading, specially selected for each theme of the course and a list of internet sites make an integral part of the course.

The final product is a presentation where master students are to cover all issues included in the course structure in reference to a particular business culture and a country. Students are to substantiate their choice of the country under consideration. Presentations are assessed both by a teacher and peer students against preselected criteria. Student are supposed to make notes filling-in tables where the issues in question are stated as table headings, so that useful information can easily be derived and used by the learners when necessary.

Experimental teaching took place in the Institute of Business Process Management and Economics in 2 groups of master students in Management (an experimental and a control) and have proved the hypothesis that concurrent communication and reflection development positively influences both competencies development. After the experiment students of experimental group assessed themselves as being more confident

in communication (4.10 against 3.53 points out of 5) on professional topics. The control group results were negative.

The data of expert assessment by teachers, who observed classes have shown positive dependence of reflective competence and communicative skills levels on each other after learning the course in question. The share of students with a well developed level of communication skills increased by 11% and advanced level of reflective competence increased by 18%.

Qualitative research methods – interviews with students, questionnaires and peer observations proved multiple benefits for master students: critical thinking and self-management abilities being developed in communication can make a synergy effect of improving skills of business communication and reflection alongside with cross-cultural knowledge.

On the base of experimental data on the control stage the authors came to the conclusion of the positive interdependence of reflective competence and communicative skills development in a specially organized learning environment/ Moreover, at the final presentation student demonstrated high level of knowledge of management problems in international context than students of a control group who had traditional lectures on similar themes.

Conclusion: Education of master students in Management can be optimized on condition of involving them into concurrent development of communication skills and reflection competence. Specially organized educational environment can help master students in Management in the process of constructing their professional identity by discussing topics of professional interest in reflection and communication. Thus, answering the question put in the title of the article we consider communication and reflection being two sides of the same coin – two interrelated and positively interconnected competences within a master course in Management

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